

SIHANOUK ASKS COUNTRY TO SEARCH FOR SUCCESSOR

Cambodia king abdicates

Associated Press

PHNOM PENH, Oct. 7. — Cambodia's King Norodom Sihanouk has abdicated, citing poor health, and asked the country to begin searching for his successor, the head of the National Assembly said on Thursday.

King Sihanouk, 81, announced his retirement in a letter sent from Beijing which his son, Prince Norodom Ranariddh, read to the legislature on Thursday. "According to the statement that I have received and just read, His Majesty has already abdicated," Prince Ranariddh told reporters, adding that the news was "very regrettable and shocking for all Cambodians who love him and regard him as sacred."

The king has repeatedly threatened to step down following inconclusive elections in July last year, expressing frustration at squabbling between Cambodia's main political par-

ties. Prince Ranariddh said leaders of the ruling coalition planned "to beg" the king to stay on as monarch. He said he had been granted permission to visit his father and would leave for Beijing on Friday to hear "the reason behind His Majesty's decision."

Earlier, the prince said Prime Minister Mr Hun Sen and acting head of state and ruling party leader Mr Chea Sim would also seek permission to visit the king, but it was unclear whether they would join him on Friday.

Mr Hun Sen is in Vietnam to attend a summit of Asian and European leaders. The king canceled his planned return to Cambodia, scheduled for Thursday, Prince Ranariddh said, adding that King Sihanouk's abdication left Cambodia like "a family where children have no father, a house without a roof."

Prince Ranariddh said the king's decision was prompted by a letter he received from

Opposition leader Mr Sam Rainsy, who complained that his party was being unfairly blamed for protests scheduled to coincide with the monarch's return to Cambodia on Thursday.

But Mr Sam Rainsy said his letter was not to blame. "The king is ... not a child. He cannot be influenced by anybody and be led that easily to make such a dramatic decision," Mr Rainsy said, calling the prince's allegation "irresponsible."

The king in Cambodia is not a hereditary title, but all candidates must have a royal bloodline. Prince Ranariddh could be a candidate, but has already said he is not interested.

King Sihanouk has been an influential figure in Cambodian politics for more than half a century, leading the country to independence from French colonialism in the 1950s. He left Cambodia in January after trying and failing to end the months of political feuding.

The letter from the king asked



the country to form a nine-member throne council — as set in Cambodian law — to choose the next monarch. Hun Sen and other political leaders would be included in the council.

A similar statement also appeared on the king's web site, where he often posts handwritten messages in French about current affairs. With that state-

ment was a 4 September letter jointly signed by Mr Hun Sen and Prince Ranariddh, who are partners in the current government, proposing another prince, Norodom Sihamoni, as the future king.

The king asked that he be allowed to step down because of his fragile health, saying doctors have detected a "new and serious ailment" in his stomach. The letter did not elaborate. "I ask all compatriots to please allow me to retire," he said.

Mr Chea Sim will remain the acting head of state until a new monarch is selected. Mr Lao Monghay, legal director for the Center for Social Development, a local group, said the king's abdication was not surprising "considering his age and frustration over ... the political developments in the country" and the lack of respect shown him by leaders. "He seems to be sick and tired" of the political and economic situation facing the country, Mr Lao Monghay said.

Sihanouk son turns down throne

Agence France-Presse
Phnom Penh, October 14

CAMBODIA'S PRINCE Norodom Ranariddh on Thursday said on his return from Beijing that he had turned down an offer of the throne from his revered father and instead begged his half-brother to take the position.

Prince Norodom Sihamoni, 51, will be named as the impoverished nation's new monarch within hours, said Ranariddh, who heads Cambodia's royalist

political party. Norodom Sihanouk last week stepped down as king, a position he has held on and off for more than 60 years.

"The king and the queen were satisfied by offering the throne to me after (Sihanouk), they said again and again. But I made the decision not to take the throne a long time ago," Ranariddh said.

Ranariddh said he had persuaded a reluctant Sihamoni, a former ballet dancer, to take the throne from his 81-year-old father.

"Norodom Sihamoni does not want to take the throne at all. He pleaded with me, I also pleaded with him: 'If brother, you won't take the throne, there will be difficulties because Hun Sen said clearly that he won't accept anyone besides Prince Sihamoni'," he said.

Ranariddh said he had his "own reasons" for not wanting to become monarch. "You know I'm very well known now, I'm known as the prince who refuses to be king," he added.



AFP
Prince Norodom Ranariddh at the Phnom Penh airport on Thursday.

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